

Politics and Psychology of Fear: Threat Narratives in State Security Policy

Samsidar

Sultan Thaha State Islamic University, Jambi, Indonesia

E-mail: dharsamsidar@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines how the politics of fear is shaped and exploited through threat narratives in state security policy. Using a qualitative approach and literature study methods, this study analyzes the dynamics of discourse used by the state to legitimize repressive security measures. Threat narratives, discursively constructed by state actors and amplified by the media, play a central role in shaping public perceptions of imminent danger. The resulting collective fear allows the state to justify enacting extraordinary policies, even when there is no real, proportionate threat. Within the framework of securitization and state of exception theories, security policy is interpreted as a response to politically defined, rather than objective, threats. As a result, the space for public participation is narrowed, civil rights are diminished, and the rule of law is threatened. This study emphasizes that security cannot be built on manipulative constructs of fear but must be grounded in transparency, justice, and respect for democratic principles. Critique of the politics of fear is crucial to ensure that security policy does not deviate from the framework of a democratic and civilized state based on the rule of law.

Keywords : National Security; Threat Narrative; Politics of Fear

Introduction

In the construction of contemporary security policies, the state not only plays a role as an actor that reacts to actual threats, but also as a producer of narratives that engineer them.



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Public perception of potential threats. This phenomenon reflects how political power often uses fear as a legally and psychologically legitimate instrument of social control. Collective fear of disintegration, invasion, or social chaos serves as the basis for legitimizing state coercive action, which in many cases exceeds the proportionality of objective security needs. This politics of fear demonstrates how symbolic power can create a sense of urgency and emergency that justifies the expansion of state authority.

Fear is not a neutral psychological response, but can be manipulated through systematically constructed symbols, discourse, and images of the enemy. Threat narratives are often packaged through the media and disseminated with high intensity, creating psychological effects such as collective trauma, hypervigilance, and passive acceptance of policies that restrict civil liberties. Within this framework, social psychology and affect theory play a crucial role in explaining how negative emotions such as fear are mobilized to create political consensus and the public's willingness to sacrifice democratic values for the sake of perceived security.

The dominance of threat narratives in security policy discourse has also led to a shift in the security paradigm itself. Initially oriented toward physical defense against external aggression, security has now become a psychological state that must be maintained, even in the absence of a real threat. This is known as securitization, the process of politicizing an issue by constructing it as an existential threat requiring an extraordinary response. Policies resulting from this process often ignore legal procedures and the principles of checks and balances, justified within the discursive framework of threat and crisis.

When the narrative of fear becomes the primary foundation of policy formulation, the boundaries between normalcy and emergency are blurred. The state gains justification for permanently enforcing extraordinary policies, such as mass surveillance, labeling as internal enemies, and silencing opposition voices. This strategy aligns with Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception," where the law is suspended to maintain the order that, ironically, results from the suspension itself. The long-term implications of this situation are the erosion of the principle of the rule of law and the rise of covert authoritarianism within formal democratic regimes.

On the other hand, institutionally constructed fear creates an unequal relationship between the state and citizens. Civil society becomes a passive object in the policy chain, with space for participation increasingly limited due to the stigmatization of dissent. When individuals or groups critical of security policies are labeled as potential threats, social control turns into covert repression. This inequality is exacerbated by the lack of transparency and accountability in security policy-making processes, which are often conducted behind closed doors by executive elites with minimal legal legitimacy.

In a global context, the state security architecture underwent drastic changes after traumatic events like the 9/11 attacks. The global narrative of terrorism and transnational threats expanded, which was then adopted by various countries, including developing democracies, to justify the expansion of security authorities. Aggressive preventive approaches, such as preemptive arrest or unauthorized wiretapping, became the new norm, sustained by the logic of fear, rather than by measurable and evidence-based security needs.

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The psychology of fear recurrent in policy narratives fuels the normalization of human rights violations and the disregard for the principles of the rule of law. Under these conditions, citizens are asked to surrender most of their civil and political rights in exchange for the illusion of security offered by the state. This paradox places security as the ultimate goal, but with an ironic consequence: the expansion of state power does not always guarantee substantive security, but instead increases the risk of abuse of power.

Therefore, it is crucial to reexamine the threat narrative in security policy from a critical, interdisciplinary perspective, combining political, legal, and psychological approaches. The goal is not to negate the importance of security, but rather to ensure that the resulting policies do not violate the values of democracy, human rights, and social justice. Fear must not be allowed to become the sole foundation of public policy, as it is vulnerable to manipulation by exclusive and repressive powerful interests.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method with a library research approach, aiming to examine and analyze the phenomenon of the politics of fear and threat narratives in state security policy through conceptual and theoretical review. This approach is considered relevant because the issues studied are multidisciplinary and require in-depth analysis of abstract concepts such as power, fear, narrative, and security.

The data sources in this study were obtained from secondary materials including scientific journals, academic books, policy documents, reports from international institutions, and relevant articles from various disciplines such as political science, political psychology, security, and public policy studies. The author also refers to key ideas from leading scholars such as Michel Foucault (discourse and power), Giorgio Agamben (state of exception), Ulrich Beck (risk society), and Barry Buzan (securitization in security theory).

The analytical technique used in this study is qualitative content analysis, examining how threat narratives are formed, reproduced, and manipulated in various contexts of state security policy. This analysis is conducted by identifying discourse patterns, symbols, and communication strategies used by state actors to create threat perceptions within the public.

Within the framework of this literature study, the researcher did not collect primary data, but rather constructed theoretical understanding through literature comparison and the synthesis of various critical approaches. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing and critiquing various opinions, study results, and arguments from various academic perspectives to obtain a comprehensive and reflective understanding of the study object.

Using this method, this research seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on the politics of fear, emphasizing the importance of critical awareness of politically produced threat narratives and their impact on repressive policies. Furthermore, the literature approach allows for cross-national and cross-temporal analysis, thus enriching understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between the state, power, and collective psychology in security policy.

Results and Discussion

In the postmodern era, the construction of security no longer relies solely on the existence of real threats, but rather on the perception of threats constructed through political narratives. The state, through its apparatus, has the capacity to shape social representations of danger, both internal and external, which then serve as the basis for policymaking. These narratives are not only preventative but also performative, as they are capable of creating socio-political conditions that affirm the need for repressive state intervention. Therefore, threat narratives cannot be separated from the dynamics of discursive power described by Michel Foucault, where the production of discourse becomes a tool for shaping social reality.

In this context, fear becomes symbolic capital that can be mobilized to achieve specific interests. Collective fear does not arise spontaneously, but is systemically constructed through symbols, language, and media. The psychology of fear is exploited by state actors to shape public compliance with policies that actually suppress civil liberties. When the public is positioned as the "threatened" party, and the state as the sole protector, an asymmetrical relationship is formed that subjects citizens to the state's protectionist logic, even at the expense of their constitutional rights.

In the theoretical framework of securitization developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, threats to security are not objective, but are generated through discursive processes that make certain issues existential. Thus, security politics is the politics of language, where naming something as a threat requires discursive legitimacy and authoritative actors trusted by the public. Threat narratives become rhetorical tools to justify exceptional actions outside of normal legal mechanisms.

This securitization process often blurs the line between emergency and normal conditions. The state can create a permanent state of emergency to maintain the legitimacy of authoritarian policies. Giorgio Agamben calls this a state of exception, a condition in which the law is suspended in the name of the law itself. In such conditions, the principles of deliberative democracy are regressed because the policy formulation process is no longer participatory or transparent, but rather coercive and closed.

An analysis of various post-9/11 security policies shows how even democratic countries use the narrative of terrorism as an instrument to expand the authority of their military and intelligence agencies. Policies such as the Patriot Act in the United States, the Anti-Terrorism Act in the United Kingdom, and the Terrorism Laws in various developing countries, including Indonesia, reflect the tendency of states to use fear to justify the expansion of their power. Literature studies show that although these policies are claimed to safeguard national security, their implementation is often accompanied by human rights violations, mass surveillance, and the silencing of opposition groups.

The psychology of fear plays a central role in public acceptance of these repressive policies. When individuals feel powerless in the face of a perceived threat, they tend to surrender some of their rights and freedoms to state authorities for the illusion of security. Loss aversion theory in political psychology explains that people fear losing security more than gaining new freedoms. As a result, state authorities gain significant latitude to act beyond constitutional bounds.

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This phenomenon can be seen in various cases where the state labels certain groups as "radical," "anti-state," or "destabilizing" without due process. These labels serve as symbolic legitimacy, facilitating repressive actions against groups deemed to deviate from the official state narrative. In this case, the construction of threat is not only external but also internal, namely against the state's own citizens who hold alternative views.

The implications of the dominance of threat narratives in state security policy are the erosion of public space and the strengthening of an authoritarian political culture. When the discourse of fear becomes dominant, society loses the courage to be critical and participatory. This results in a weakening of the social control function of power. At this point, the politics of fear not only subjugates society but also creates dependence on the state as the sole savior.

Literature research reveals that threat narratives do not exist in isolation, but are shaped by a network of political interests, media outlets, and security institutions. The media plays a significant role in reinforcing threat narratives through news framing, hyperbolic language, and the repetition of frightening information. In many cases, the media serves as an extension of state power, creating a collective imagination of the dangers threatening the social order.

Furthermore, fear-based security policies also create an ambivalent legal structure. On the one hand, the law is used to protect society from threats, but on the other, it is also used as a tool of state oppression. This ambivalence is evident in how regulations designed to counter extremism are instead used to suppress academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to privacy. The law is no longer neutral but is instead imbued with political interests reinforced by narratives of threat.

Literature studies also show that in such circumstances, security policy reform must be accompanied by a holistic approach based on the principles of substantial democracy. Policies should not be based solely on threat perceptions but should be tested through participatory and accountable mechanisms. The involvement of civil society, academics, and independent media is key to avoiding the dominance of a single state narrative.

Using a qualitative literature study approach, this discussion provides a critical reflection on how the state produces and manipulates fear as a political tool. The study demonstrates that the politics of fear is an effective strategy in the short term, but carries long-term risks to the sustainability of democracy and the protection of civil rights. Therefore, protecting democratic principles and the rule of law must be the foundation of every security policy issued by the state.

In closing, it should be emphasized that the threat narrative in state security policy should not be based solely on the logic of fear. Public policy must be based on objective data, transparent risk analysis, and respect for human rights. The state is obligated to create security without sacrificing democracy. Without adequate critique of the politics of fear, society will continue to live in the illusion of a perpetual threat.

Conclusion

Based on the results of a qualitative study conducted through literature review, it can be concluded that the politics of fear is a discursive strategy used by the state to shape and direct public opinion

in order to support repressive security policies. Fear is produced through threat narratives constructed symbolically, communicatively, and institutionally by state actors with the support of the mass media and security forces. Within this framework, security policy no longer relies on objective threats but rather on social constructions that position certain issues as existential crises. The resulting securitization process makes security policy a response to politically framed threats, resulting in extraordinary actions that often ignore the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. In practice, the politics of fear creates a persistent state of exception, where the law is suspended and public participation is diminished in the name of national protection. The implications of the dominance of threat narratives in security policy are weakened oversight mechanisms, eroded civil liberties, and increased potential for abuse of power by the state. The psychology of fear instilled in the public tends to make people accept repressive state actions without resistance, thus strengthening authoritarianism within formal democratic systems. Thus, a critical examination of every security narrative created by the state is necessary, as well as a reaffirmation of the importance of the principles of participation, transparency, and accountability in public policy formulation. True security cannot be built on fear; it must be born of justice, public trust, and respect for citizens' fundamental rights.

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